

## The soft underbelly of the Coronavirus

Maybe it's my warped mind or maybe I'm just going stir crazy because of the Coronavirus all around me, but I'm looking at things in a totally different light these days. For example, I started thinking about the ways our society is changing and will change over the next few months as we all practice social distancing and home sequestration or quarantining. It seems to me that one of the obvious things that will occur is a spike in suicide and murder. The reasons are simple: by being cooped up for long periods of time, any pre-existing domestic problems we might have could very well become exaggerated and take on a life of their own and lead to aggressive behavior and/or violence.

Not knowing what I don't know, I immediately went to the scientific community and began reading about testing of confinement on rodents and people. I came across a study of ten years ago that was entitled, "Laboratory Rodent Welfare: Thinking outside the cage" by a researcher by the name of Jonathan Balcome who contributed this article to the Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy ([https://animalstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=acwp\\_lab](https://animalstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=acwp_lab)).

I've always been fascinated by mice as I view them as pretty smart creatures. Even though they're considered 'lower mammals' I've often preferred them to the company of some of my more enlightened, fellow, 'higher mammals.' The scientific community considers rodents to be highly aware, emotional, highly sentient, and in the case of rats at least, considerably intelligent. According to the article, "Highly social mammals, rats have evolved behaviors that can be described as considerate or empathic. A 1959 study titled "Emotional Reactions of Rats to the Pain of Others" showed that rats would stop pressing a bar to obtain food if doing so delivered an electric shock to a rat next to them (Church, 1959). In another study, rats pressed a lever to lower to the floor a squirming, vocalizing rat trapped in a suspended harness (Rice & Gainer, 1962); they did not respond to a suspended block of Styrofoam. Perhaps the Good Samaritan rats merely wanted to stop a disturbing stimulus and were not concerned for the other rat; however, at the very least, a form of empathy termed "emotional contagion" was occurring (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Rats also show an emotional fever response, their body temperatures rising when handled by an unfamiliar person but not so if the person is known and trusted (Briese & deQuijada, 1970). Meticulous studies suggest rats' capacity for joy (Burgdorf & Panksepp, 2001) and for optimism and pessimism based on their living conditions (Harding, Paul, & Mendl, 2004)."

One of the takeaways from the article that may apply to humans who are forced to be together over longer periods of time, away from their 'natural' environment, may be described in, "Caging imposes restrictions on normal social dynamics in rodents (Latham & Mason, 2004)."

Moving from rats to humans, there have been a number of studies that have been done on our prison populations. These studies range from those looking at prison populations in general to those inmates in solitary confinement. The findings are fascinating and bear reading and discussion, especially if we want to mitigate the effects of forced non-prison confinement on our general population. If we couple scientific results with common sense and our own experiences, I think it's inevitable that we will see murder and suicide rates, along with cases of domestic violence, increase, irrespective of pre-existing domestic problems. Okay, so much for killing or maiming each other, but you can bet that when we come out of this crisis and the statistics for those crimes are tallied up, the Left, the media and the presumptive Democratic Party's candidate for President will all blame Donald Trump for them.

Beyond the obvious hit to our economy which will be devastating, the Covid-19 crisis is bound to have an impact on our water supply as hundreds more hand-washings will take place on a daily basis by millions of people. In water-scarce places like New Mexico where I live, this is going to create some enormous problems. Then there's all that new soap and hand sanitizer usage (that is if you can find it at the supermarkets). How much of that is being pushed into our water supply?

We are currently experiencing shortages of all sorts of items. One of them is toilet paper. A good friend of mine told me yesterday that his son in Minnesota was speaking to a man coming out of a supermarket with his cart full of toilet paper. He was complaining that many of the store's food items were bought up and the shelves were bare. My friend's son then told the man that given that fact, might it not be a good idea to take some of that toilet paper back considering that what came out from the 'southern exit' was directly dependent on what went in from the 'northern' one?

I say, God bless Minnesotans and indeed most of the whole Midwestern population that doesn't overreact. That same friend of mine and I were talking about the changes we've experienced in our seven plus decades on the planet as our country has moved from a rural-based agrarian economy to a much more urban one. In the 'old days' when many of us lived in small towns, our circle of personal contacts was much smaller. We weren't globalists unless you call meeting at the post office, the general store or playing cribbage at the local tobacconist, *globalizing*. These days, most Americans cannot escape coming in contact with dozens of people and putting ourselves at risk from God knows what. That is up until cities and states started imposing requirements on our places of congregation like restaurants, bars, shopping malls, churches and schools.

Social distancing may be bending back that curve and be returning us to those days of yesteryear when we had fewer contacts, but it won't be without a price as I mentioned at the start of this article. If we look at the strain on our resources, there is some good news, though. Because of forced confinement we won't be using as much gas, maybe as little as half of our normal consumption. That should please the 'Bernie Bros' and the AOC acolytes, but it won't be good news for Exxon Mobil and all the big oil refiners/sellers. Also on the upside will be our use of social media platforms - and the advertisers on those platforms will benefit - as more of us will be online 24/7. The CEOs of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are probably turning digital somersaults at the thought of millions of dollars' worth of new ad revenue.

Today, I watched one of my new regular programs...the President's Coronavirus briefing. It's become a staple and I'm getting to know the Coronavirus Task Force members by name. I'm sure they will soon enjoy cult status like cast members of TV dramas of old like Peyton Place, Twin Peaks and Friends. Soon, each of them will have their own fan clubs and their daily prognostications and pronouncements will spawn titillating stories for the media. Or, am I going completely off the reservation here? I'm afraid this is what happens when our world is turned upside down and we lose our perspective. We tend to form alternate realities and have difficulty in separating the soft underbelly of truth from its rough hide. I'll take rats any day.

*Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: [stephan@stephanhelgesen.com](mailto:stephan@stephanhelgesen.com)*